

Soviet Transport Capability to Move Goods
Into Iran

SUMMARY

Soviet-Iranian transport links -- which supported some 20 percent of total Iranian imports or some 3 to 4 million tons a year prior to the revolution -- have become seriously congested due to internal distribution problems in Iran and ongoing shortfalls in Soviet railroad performance. As a result, the Soviet system is having serious trouble handling the present sharply reduced volume of traffic headed for Iran. We would guess that the amounts involved are probably less than 1-2 million tons (annual rate). The Soviet system would be unable to handle much larger volumes in the next several months without cutting back substantially on their internal transport use. Even if the Soviets are able and/or willing to handle large volumes for Iran, the Iranian distribution system is in no condition to handle any more traffic via the Soviet routes than is now being handled.

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Soviet-Iranian Transport Links

The Soviet-Iranian transport links have usually carried about 20% of Iran's import volume in recent years -- about 3-4 million tons annually prior to the revolution. This may now be down to 1-2 million tons (annual rate), but we have little data to confirm this. Soviet transit services to Iran include:

- (1) the Trans-Siberian Landbridge for containerized cargo from Japan, which handled the largest share;
- (2) the Transcaucasian Container Service for containerized cargo moving from Western Europe to Finland by sea and from there by Soviet railways to Iran;
- (3) the Caspian Volga-Balt steamship line, a seasonal mixed river-sea service linking British and West European ports with Iranian ports on the Caspian Sea via the Baltic Sea, the Volga-Baltic Waterway, and the Volga River;
- (4) a new mixed river/sea service linking Mediterranean ports with Iranian ports on the Caspian via the Black Sea and the Volga-Don Canal;
- (5) and international trucking service between Western Europe and Iran via the Soviet highway net.

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The Soviet railroads which serve the Iranian border radiate from the major eastern Black Sea and Sea of Azov ports of Rostov, Novorossiysk, Tuapse, and Batumi and consist of two main lines which originate at Rostov and run in a southeastern direction to Baku on the Caspian Sea. (See Table 1 and Map.) These lines basically serve the area between the Black and Caspian Seas. [REDACTED]

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Two major lines lead to a Soviet single track railroad between Yerevan and Baku which skirts the Iranian border north of the Aras River. This rail line connects with the Iranian rail network at the Soviet border town of Dzhul'fa, where freight must be transloaded from Soviet broad gauge to Iranian standard gauge rolling stock. In addition, a major Iranian highway runs southeasterly from Dzhul'fa to the Iranian capital, Tehran. [REDACTED]

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Along the western coast of the Caspian Sea the Iranian border also is served by a Soviet single track railroad which branches off from the main line south of Baku and runs to Astara on the Iranian border. East of the Caspian Sea, a Soviet single track railroad skirts the Iranian border between Askhabab and Kaakhka. Between these towns, one surfaced road and several unsurfaced roads lead to the Iranian border. [REDACTED]

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Rail Constraints

The Soviet rail system to the Iranian border is having problems in moving goods into Iran. In the USSR the system suffers from poor management and sporadic shortages of freight cars. Freight car distribution is poorly planned and rail-road customers tie up cars for excessive periods. These problems are compounded by internal distribution problems in Iran. In spite of this, if sufficient priority were given by Moscow and the Iranian situation improved, the Soviets could increase overland freight traffic to Iran but at some cost to their own economy. This would require the allocation of additional rail cars from their inadequate inventory to move goods to Iran, which would cause further disruptions in the Soviet economy by giving priority to the movement of Iranian goods at the expense of Soviet goods. [REDACTED]

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Soviet Waterway Drawbacks

Soviet inland waterways will not be available for the movement of cargo to Iran for at least the next 3-4 months. The seasonal closing of the Northern Caspian Sea and the entire Greater Volga system by ice between now and the spring prevents the use of water routes from Iranian Caspian ports to the Black and Mediterranean seas through the Volga-Don Canal and to the Baltic and North seas via the Volga-Baltic waterway. Traffic normally handled by these waterways would have to be

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diverted to the Soviet railroads and highways, further increasing pressure on the USSR's overtaxed truck and railroad car inventories. []

When these routes are ice-free, the USSR has adequate numbers of shallow-draft mixed river-sea vessels in both its river and merchant fleets to meet Iranian needs at little cost or sacrifice to the Soviet economy. Open water on the lower Caspian during the winter would permit the loading of freight from trucks or trains at Soviet Caspian ports for final delivery to Iranian Caspian ports in the event of continued congestion at Soviet/Iranian border crossing points. []

Highways

We do not believe the Soviets would engage in any significant movement of freight into Iran by highway because of the large number of trucks and fuel required. The Soviet road network is, however, relatively well developed between Rostov, Tbilisi, and Baku as well as along the eastern edge of the Black Sea and has the capacity to move around 34 million tons a year into Iran. If necessary, this hard-surfaced road network could be used to move freight through Nakichevan' to the Iranian border to supplement rail shipments but again only on a priority basis and at some cost to the Soviet economy. []

Current Difficulties in Moving Imports Across the
Soviet/Iranian Border

Serious internal transport problems in Iran is currently causing backlogs and congestion problems at the main Soviet border crossing points of Dzhul'fa and Astara. On 30 November the Soviets announced that all shipments to the Iranian border would be halted at least through 10 December.

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